IN THE END IS THE BEGINNING
EASTER SUNDAY
April 16, 2006

JOHN M. BUCHANAN, PASTOR
FOURTH PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Psalm 98
Mark 15:42–47
Mark 16:1–8

"So they went out and fled from the tomb,
for terror and amazement had seized them;
and they said nothing to anyone,
for they were afraid."
Mark 16:8 (NRSV)

The evidence of Easter is a reconfigured Easter people, people who are no longer afraid
of the dark, people who dare to live by their affections and not by their fears,
people who know that they need not die in order to truly experience resurrection living,
. . . people who fear neither death nor life. . . . In short, people such as you and me
who aspire to be people like that. We are the Easter people, for death,
in all of its cynical, calculating, greedy ways, no longer has control over us.
We have a better idea, we claim a greater truth, we live because we are loved;
and because we are loved, we can live.

Peter Gomes
What We Forgot to Tell You

Startle us, O God, with your truth,
the truth that Christ is risen and that love is stronger than death.
We come here this morning as the women came to the tomb,
with our uncertainties, our doubts and fears,
and with our hope and our love.
Startle us with the truth of the resurrection
and renew our hope, our love and our courage
in Jesus Christ, our risen Lord. Amen.

Preparing for Easter is complicated business for churches everywhere. The reason is simple: a lot of people come to church, a lot more than attend on any other Sunday. So we try to plan carefully, all churches do—plan for more seats, more bulletins, more parking. Parking is particularly complicated here in the center of the city. After twenty years as pastor of this church, my favorite dream is of a vast church parking lot, a wonderful blacktop parking lot stretching to the horizon, with parking spaces carefully marked, well-lighted, attendants guiding worshipers to parking spaces, a spacious drop-off area for little children—everything this church does not have and that makes getting here on Easter morning a particular challenge. When I told a colleague about my favorite parking lot dream, he said, "Maybe you ought to put your name in at Willow Creek." In any event, we've been talking about this morning for weeks: How to do this and do that. What doors to use. Where people can stand to wait between services. What to do if the parking garage lines stall and back up. How to deliver a little refreshment to people standing in line. And in the middle of it, the weather forecasters began to talk about rain, thunderstorms, in fact, which never materialized, thanks be to God, but when I wrote this, the forecasters were absolutely certain. And that's when my colleague Dana raised the best theological question of the week: "One of the questions I want to ask when I get to the other side," she said, "is why does it rain on Easter?"

All of which is to say that we are deeply grateful that you are here. It is conventional practice for the preacher to lecture the congregation on Easter morning on the merits of regular church attendance: to say something rude like, "I want to wish you a pleasant Memorial Day and Fourth of July, a Happy Labor Day and Thanksgiving, because I won't be seeing many of you until Christmas." Not this preacher. I'm glad you're here. I'm grateful. I say every Easter, and I mean it, that if you only come to church once a year, this is the Sunday to do it. Not only because the music is great and the flowers beautiful, but because what is happening here today is literally a matter of life and death, and what is being said and proclaimed and sung and prayed in this church and every church on Easter Sunday morning is the most startling, most world-shattering, most important piece of news imaginable. Christ is risen. Christ is risen indeed.

Some news is bigger than our ability to say it. That's why we have hymns and a great organ and trumpets on Easter. Words alone aren't big enough. From his prison cell in Nazi Germany, Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote to his parents, "It's a year now since I actually heard a hymn. But the music of the inner ear can often surpass what we hear physically. I get on particularly well with the Easter hymns."

And the poets—Wendell Berry, taking one of his *Sabbath* walks in the woods:

The little stream sings
in the crease of the hill.
It is the water of life. It knows
nothing of death, nothing.
And this is the morning
of Christ's resurrection.
The tomb is empty. There is
no death. . . .

T. S. Eliot, at the conclusion of one of his complex poems, "East Coker": "In my end is my beginning."

I kept thinking about that—"In my end is my beginning"—because that's pretty much what the Gospel of Mark says about Easter. Each of the four Gospels tells the Easter story, and each tells it slightly differently. Mark is the briefest. He devotes pages of detailed information to the last few days: Jesus enters Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, ejects money changers from the temple, teaches, argues with the religious officials, arranges to eat a last supper with his disciples, is betrayed, arrested, interrogated all night long, appears before the Roman Governor, Pontius Pilate, on Friday, is condemned to die, is tormented and tortured by the soldiers, forced to carry his cross up the hill known as Golgotha, and crucified. His disciples run for their lives, hide behind a locked door; a few women watch from a distance as he dies at 3:00 in the afternoon. A good man, Joseph of Arimathea, asks for the body and buries him in his own garden tomb. Mark devotes pages to that five-day period. Saturday, quiet Saturday, is not mentioned at all. And Easter morning, the grand finale, gets a few sentences.

Three women go to the tomb in the early morning to anoint the body. They worry about rolling the stone away. When they arrive, they discover that the stone has already been removed. The tomb is empty. A young man is there, and he tells the three, who are now shaken, scared to death, in fact, that Jesus has been raised. "Go tell his disciples," the young man says. "Go back to Galilee, where it all started, the beginning. You'll see him there." In the end is the beginning.

This brief, almost terse account ends, "So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid." It's not much of a conclusion, actually. In fact, it is so unsatisfactory, so incomplete, that there is evidence that over the next few centuries, scribes who were copying the text kept adding to it, doctoring it up a bit, making it a little more literarily satisfying.

Author Mary Gordon says, "How extraordinary, to end a heroic narrative with the words, 'they were scared, you see.'"

About this brief, almost blunt account, Fred Craddock quips, “Is this any way to run a resurrection? Is this enough to persuade, to stir new life in the followers of Jesus?”

I love Mark’s account precisely because it is so unadorned, straightforward, and so very, honestly human. The women, the first witnesses to the resurrection, were shocked, terrified, stunned into silence. That feels authentic to me. It’s exactly how you and I might have reacted.

In his new book, *What Jesus Meant*, Garry Wills writes,

> The first Christians were not expecting the resurrection. They did not believe it when the women first announced it to them. They had, remember, all scattered and hidden as Jesus was condemned and executed. . . . Yet this band of cowards was suddenly changed into an energetic body of effective evangels, spreading their faith, firmly offering the claim that Jesus lives.

The rationalist in us—and in them, I am sure—would like to have a little proof. Peter Gomes says that preachers on Easter often sound like attorneys producing evidence, arguing from reason and science that this proposal is at least plausible and possible. But finally, what is being proclaimed today simply transcends reason and intellect, confounds what we think we know, and addresses our spirits, our souls, our love, and our deepest hope. And no data, no evidence, no Da Vinci Code, no Gospel of Judas, no Shroud of Turin, can ever satisfactorily prove or disprove it.

What has always been compelling to me is the transformation of Jesus’ disciples, cowering in fear behind a locked door somewhere in Jerusalem, into fearless and fierce followers and advocates and martyrs. Garry Wills writes, “Those unable to face the prospect of Jesus’ death were soon embracing with great fortitude and hope their own martyrdom.”

What is being addressed in us on Easter is that deep place in our souls where we decide who we will be, how we will live, whom we will trust. What transformed cowards into brave disciples was the conviction that Jesus Christ was alive and therefore there was absolutely no reason to be afraid of anything anymore. “Do not be afraid” were the first words spoken to the women at the tomb. Fear not, fear nothing, fear not even that ultimate threat that everyone is afraid of, namely death.

What transformed them is the same truth that raises up brave men and women to live and witness in the face of danger—Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Desmond Tutu, Martin Luther King—the same truth that raises up millions upon millions of men and women to live on with courage and conviction in the face of illness, depression, the debilitation and losses that go along with

aging, and, of course, death: namely, the conviction that Jesus Christ is risen today, the trust that Love is strong as death.

William Sloane Coffin Jr. died last Wednesday after struggling with the effects of a stroke. He was an Army intelligence officer in World War II, then a CIA agent, a gifted musician, a brilliant intellect, a gruff and warmly courageous follower of Jesus. He was chaplain at Yale during the Vietnam War and was in the news a lot for his role in protesting that war. He became Senior Minister of Riverside Church in New York City and, after his retirement, the Executive Director of SANE, the nuclear disarmament lobby. He never stopped arguing, fighting, advocating, following Jesus. He was a guest preacher here once and got into an argument with a worshiper who had come to heckle him—a shouting match from the pulpit. I had never seen anything like it. He was in jail on several occasions for his participation in civil rights and peace demonstrations. The man in the next cell to his once, James Carroll, an ex-priest and author, remembers how dark it was in the jail and how depressed and afraid he was. He writes,

> I have no idea what prompted him to do so, but at some point in the night, the man in the next cell began to sing, softly at first. His resolute baritone gradually filled the air as he moved easily into what you recognized as Handel's *Messiah*: "Comfort ye, comfort ye, my people." And then you recognized the voice as that of William Sloane Coffin. . . . Others in the cell block joined their voices. "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light." . . . You did believe that "Your Redeemer Liveth" and more than that, you believed that your Redeemer had stood upon earth with you.

I admired Coffin, even when I was not in total agreement with him. We corresponded in recent years. And after I heard the news of his death on Wednesday, I went home and pulled his last book from the shelf, *Credo,* and turned to the final chapter, "The End of Life." Coffin was wise and witty on the topic. "Without death we'd never live," he wrote. "Life without death would be interminable—literally. We'd take days to get out of bed, weeks to decide 'what's next?' Students would never graduate, faculty meetings and other gatherings would go on for months. Chances are we'd be bored to death."

In an Easter sermon one time, Coffin told about a seventy-five-year-old man whose broker called him to say that he had bought some stock that in five years would make him a millionaire. "Five years!" exclaimed the man. "I don't even buy green bananas anymore."

Reflecting on his own illness and mortality: "The one true freedom in life is to come to terms with death, and as early as possible."

Coffins' own *Credo* on the subject was simple and elegant: "Before every birth and after every death there is still God. The abyss of God's love is deeper than the abyss of death. If we don't know what is beyond the grave, we do know who is beyond the grave."

The presence of death, the death of dear ones, the presence of our own death, is a reality for all of us, the "insult of our own mortality" someone called it. Dorothy Parker spoke for all of us when she said about death: "I do not approve." When my mother died and we returned to Chicago after the funeral, paying the bills, settling accounts, and clearing out the house, I found myself thinking of her in the evening, when I had called her nightly during her illness, found myself sometimes forgetting that she was gone. One evening, I have no idea why, I picked up the phone and dialed the number, her number, the number of the house in which I had lived, and let it ring in the empty living room. I never told anyone. It seemed a silly thing to do. And then I read recently something Frederick Buechner wrote.

In a new book, *Secrets in the Dark*, Buechner reflects on Jesus' last supper with his disciples and our own last supper with our dear ones one day. It was the day before Jesus died. The day, Buechner says, he knew he was going to die. Sitting at that table, Peter asked, "Lord, where are you going?" The question within that question, Buechner says, is "Are you going anywhere at all or just out like a light?" That is our question about him and about ourselves. Did Jesus' life run out? Do you and I run out?

Jesus' answer to Peter's question "Where are you going?" was "Let not your heart be troubled. . . . I go to prepare a place for you. . . . In my Father's house are many rooms." And then Buechner tells a remarkable story about his only brother Jamie's death and how one day he missed him so much he decided to call up his empty New York apartment. "I knew there wasn't anybody there—but who could say that at least some echo of him might be there, the sound of his voice, his marvelous laugh. So I sat there in the Vermont sunshine—this skeptical old believer, this believing old skeptic, who you would have thought had better sense—and let the phone ring, let it ring."

Jamie didn't answer it, of course. Buechner, the believing skeptic, chooses his words with great care: "Yet, who knows? Who can ever know anything for sure about the mystery of things? 'In my Father's house are many rooms,' Jesus said, and I would bet my bottom dollar that in one of those many rooms that phone rang and rang and was heard. I believe that in some sense my brother's voice was in that ringing and that Jesus' voice was in it too."

Buechner concludes: “Jesus says he is not going out like a light. He says he is going on. He says he is going ahead. He says we will go there too when our time comes.”

“Go,” the angel told the startled women on Easter morning. “He is going ahead of you—to Galilee; there you will see him.”

And that, dear friends, is God’s word to you and me on this Easter morning. Go, he is going ahead of us. He has gone into the darkness for us; he has gone into death. He has conquered death. There is nothing to fear.

You can care passionately; you can love without reservation. You can give your life to your dearest ones, the causes you care most about. You can give your life to justice, to peace, to church, to his kingdom on earth. “Go,” he said. Jesus Christ will be there. Jesus faced the worst that could happen to him. Jesus faced cruelty, torment, humiliation, and abandonment. Jesus walked into the valley of the shadow of death, and he is going ahead of us into whatever future is out there. He is already there. He will be there. He will be there tomorrow and the next day and every day up to and including the last day and beyond.

In my end is my beginning.

Christ is risen.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.